Here On We Love Radio:
Hip Hop Culture and Expressionism in Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing

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Abstract

Hip hop is a cultural movement that advocates for the collective strength of marginalized communities amid urban despair. As a ballast of *Do the Right Thing,* hip hop culture grounds its various characters and events as expressions of the black American consciousness. An essential component of the film which this paper addresses in the context of contemporary justice is the murder of Radio Raheem, an unarmed and innocent black man strangled by police. Taking up the lens of Saussurean linguistics, this article examines the function of hip hop culture throughout the film which radio (both the device and the waves) represents, fighting systemic racism as an agent of black expressionism and collective strength.

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For over four centuries, the Black community has withstood innumerable damages from systemic oppression, yet throughout this history of hate, the stronger force has always been the sense of unity and love generated from their fight for liberation. In the present era, the blow of systemic racism is delivered most acutely by the violent police forces and negligent justice systems responsible for the routine killing of innocent Black Americans. Advocacy for the victims of these murders takes form in many media and art practices, finding its modern champion in the sonic protest of hip-hop culture. As a genre, hip-hop originates from and directs public attention to Black nationalist identity, amplified by Spike Lee as a driving force in his film narratives on interracial conflict. Hip-hop's expressive vibrance and structural blend of influences have historically proven it to function as an "organic globalizer", facilitating positive change and a greater sense of cultural uprightness for subjects of institutional violence.[56] What drives Lee's narrative is the voice of love as it responds to a culture of marginalization, using hip-hop as a fulcrum for "social awareness, consciousness of one's identity, social enjoyment, and creativity" while also engaging it in a greater dialogue on issues of police violence to uplift and empower the voices of Black youth.[57]

With the above in mind, this paper will speak to Lee's film as it characterizes the ongoing struggle of the Black community, evoking through a slice of life the calamity of oppressed communities and the vitality music restores to their collective

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[56] Christopher Malone and George Martinez. "The Organic Globalizer: The Political Development of HipHop and the Prospects for Global Transformation" *New Political Science,* 531.

[57] Casarae Gibson, "Fight the Power: Hip Hop and Civil Unrest in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*." *Black Camera*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, pp. 183.

resilience. In *Do the Right Thing,* released in 1989, the Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) community stands as a microcosm of the marginalized experience—an allegory for modern America illustrated through the Brooklyn block—in which hatred is endured and combatted most viscerally by its Black residents. What the music of Lee's film demonstrates is the rise of hip-hop as a function of Black expressionism, speaking truth to power through a wave of anti-hegemonic music that builds up the pride of the Black community while also vocalizing their frustrations. By examining hip-hop as a site of both cultural pluralism and Black nationalism, this paper will argue that music finds symbolic expression in *Do the Right Thing,* functioning as an institutional force for marginalized groups to access greater political solidarity and democratic power. In Casarae Gibson's article on hip-hop and civil unrest in the film, she points to the pivotal scene where Mookie, the film's protagonist, incites a riot by throwing a garbage bin through the window of Sal's Famous Pizzeria in response to the death of Radio Raheem, who had been strangled by three white policemen that same night.[58] Mookie's action represents the same core of Black art which fights the powers of systemic racism, calling out and resisting the forces of white supremacy that perpetuate as homicides in the present age.

In understanding music as a political agent in *Do the Right Thing*, it pays well to first discuss the significance of hip-hop as a reflection of the Black experience. As a social and political phenomenon, "hip-hop is intrinsically connected to black culture and history in the United States", offering a life-affirming sense of the Black identity in the face of issues like gentrification, systemic poverty, and police violence.[59] Through elaborate audio texture, polyvocal storytelling, and a rhythmic tangle of rap, reggae, jazz, and blues, hip-hop "is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and that

[58] Gibson, 183.

[59] Malone and Martinez, 534

articulates the problem of black urban life".[60] Beyond formal composition, hip-hop also centralizes the Black perspective as it interacts with time, justice, and history. As Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" echoes from the boombox on Radio Raheem's shoulder, the lyrics assert a vital sense of pride in Blackness, stressing the art of Black love and solidarity against the hate long-afflicted by an inherently racist government and imperial culture.

As an art form, hip-hop is the central expressive vehicle for Black representation in America, and in *Do the Right Thing*, music and culture finds symbolic resonance through the vessel of the radio. Radio is the central expressive vehicle of the film, and is brought to life as a dual structure: the first being the individual device that plays music in real time and the second through the wavelengths that transport and propagate human communication across the atmosphere. In this discussion of radio, this paper approaches the role of hip-hop music from a structuralist perspective, using the linguistic model of *langue/parole* as a companionable form to the political condition Lee addresses through his characters. By examining music's form as both a device and a wave, the structuralist position identifies how hip-hop serves as a messenger of the Black consciousness, realized as twofold by Lee through the parallelism of Radio Raheem and DJ Love Daddy. Each represents a facet of Black expressionism that hip-hop encapsulates, both of whom this paper will return to as primary examples of Spike Lee's technique of narrative dualism.

What hip-hop advocates—and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" represents—is the use of music as an agent of Black testimony and political action. Lee's use of radio addresses the

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[60] Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America,* 4.

cultural, political, and social condition of marginality as it overwhelms communities across the United States, and for several of the film's characters—most notably Radio Raheem—music is their "primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic window on the world"[61]. In her groundbreaking analysis of hip-hop culture, Tricia Rose notes that the genre finds its appeal in "precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance," citing director Mike Davis in his description of hip-hop as "the fundamental matrix of self-expression for this whole generation".[7] Lee situates Bed-Stuy within this matrix, grounding the film as a call for collective organization and Black love against the ugliness of white supremacy.

Numerous characters in *Do the Right Thing* constitute expressions of the Black American consciousness, but in understanding the specific purpose of music in Lee's film, this paper will focus on the two figures explicitly linked to radio: the film's tragic hero Radio Raheem, and its narrator/DJ Mr. Señor Love Daddy (to whom this paper will hereon refer as LD). In Gibson's discussion of the film's music, she argues that the notorious Public Enemy track blasted through Radio Raheem's speakers functions throughout the film as "a social critique of mainstream America rejecting Black voices, particularly in the working class".[62] Although Radio Raheem's character has limited screen time, his narrative arc is the moral undertow of the film, exemplifying civil disobedience through his militant refusal to bow down to authority. A clarion ring of revolt sounds from the protest of "Fight the Power"; what the music represents is the flagrant disruption of a social order which consistently takes its hatred out on people of colour. By amplifying the sounds of the Black consciousness, Radio Raheem confronts the problems of systemic racism and institutional violence perpetrated

[61] Rose, 19. [7] Rose, 20
[62] Gibson, 191.

by Sal's Famous Pizzeria and the New York Police Department (NYPD). Through his performative intimidation factor, Raheem embodies "the "bad-man" literary figure in African American folkloric tradition" through which he "becomes a form of resistance to indoctrination by mainstream society". [63] As a bad-man, Radio Raheem is a moving metaphor for "pro-Black Nationalism", disrupting the order of BedStuy's white-owned institutions not to enact violence, but rather to promote resistance to the long-standing history of economic and social bondage of the Black community that the white institutions—most urgently its police organizations—represent.[64]

Through his critical demonstration of Black expressionism, Radio Raheem also represents the freedom of Black youth to assert their authenticity in their community; thus, Gibson argues, "turning down the music means repressing his ability to articulate Black America's dissatisfaction with their oppressor".[65] It is worth noting, however, that even as a badman figure, Radio Raheem's means of articulating his dissatisfaction are by no means violent or destructive. Through Lee's use of canted angles, Radio Raheem's intimidation factor is escalated not on the basis of his actual intentions, but of how he is stereotypically perceived by the people around him. Radio Raheem announces himself to the film audience with one word: "peace", and from the start, demonstrates respect and advocacy for his community—this is exemplified in the "Can't Stand the Heat" sequence when he passes through the crowd of his peers messing with the fire hydrant. As Cee, Ahmad, and Punchy open the fire hydrant, their jubilant misuse of the water is technically an act of vandalism, which he pointedly avoids. As he crosses the street, "Fight the Power" still blasting from his speakers, his friends cover the spray, letting him and his music pass through. In this subtle

[63] Gibson, 194.

[64] Gibson, 195

[65] Gibson, 195.

difference, Radio Raheem exemplifies how acts of petty destruction like the tapping of the fire hydrant are not the same as hip-hop's initiative to dismantle systemic oppression, resisting the temptation to damage public property at the risk of damage it may cause to his radio. In the "Two Slices" sequence at Sal's Famous, Radio Raheem's assertion of the Black voice is visibly disruptive to Sal, but in this particular setting— an institution that refuses to acknowledge or pay any respect to the Black community from which it generates most of its revenue—disrupting this business is his very objective. At no point in the film does either Radio Raheem or his music incite violence or destruction of property; what "Fight the Power" represents is not a literal fight but an initiative toward Black dignity that promotes a better and more equitable future for communities like Bed-Stuy. While Radio Raheem's character is indeed a metaphor for Black expressionism in its immediate cultural moment, Lee balances this character with LD, who this paper will argue contrasts Radio Raheem by representing the greater propagation of Black art throughout history.

In order to illustrate the complexity of the marginalized experience in Bed-Stuy, Lee makes frequent use of doubles as a narrative structuring device. In his analysis of the formal dualism in *Do the Right Thing*, Robert K. Lightning studies two different types of doubles in Lee's film: those based in "dialectical oppositions"[66] characterized most prominently by Mookie and Sal, and those of obvious similarity who, according to Lightning, are exemplified foremost by Jade and Mother-Sister. In his explanation of the film's characters as "symbolic [. . .], each representing a possible political choice", Lightning's charting of the dualism in the film furthers this paper's argument that Bed-Stuy represents a microcosm of the marginalized experience.[13] However, his analysis of dualism as a

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[66] Robert K. Lightning: "The Formal Dualism of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing" Cineaction,* pp. 68. [13] Lightning, 69.

political framing device in the film is not entirely exhaustive, and seeks further application in the context of Radio Raheem and LD. Through Radio Raheem, Lee characterizes hip-hop music as the expressive vehicle of protest for Black youth, and through LD, Lee characterizes Black history as the foundation from which this modern expression is generated. In examining more closely the formal dualism of radio in Lee's film, this paper will further the contention that hip-hop represents the voice of Black youth just as it reaffirms the ancestral roots of protest well-established by the generations of Black art that came before.

Of the numerous differences Lee constructs between the radio doubles, one of the most visible distinctions is the contrast in their mobility. Radio Raheem is constantly in motion throughout the film. From the outset, his presence on the block is distinctly fluid: never settled nor seated, representing the spirit of Black nationalism as it pervades and interacts with its immediate cultural moment. Conversely, LD's presence remains static; he never leaves his booth, a function of communication across the space that channels the greater canon of Black history and excellence. Both radio figures pay clear tribute to Black art through their respective broadcasts. For LD, this tribute is most prominently made through his "roll call" segment, thanking a list of Black artists ranging everywhere from Run-DMC to Parliament-Funkadelic and Mary Lou Williams. In a similar vein, Radio Raheem declares his roll call through the intricate sampling and historical references compounded in "Fight the Power", delivering a similar message of solidarity via the tissue of citations by which hip-hop music ascribes itself.

Lightning's article on Lee's use of dualism suggests oppositions such as Marxist, psychoanalytic, and imperialist, and this paper will build on Lightning's theory by consulting interpretive

methods of structural linguistics.[67] By contrasting the fluid presence of contemporary Black expressionism with its static canonical counterpart, Lee demonstrates the dualism of radio as that of *langue*: the greater system of the Black consciousness which is personified by LD and FM108 WELOVE, and *parole*: the iteration of that cultural context in its immediate moment, represented by Radio Raheem and the music of Public Enemy. Applying this comparison, we return now to the earlier subcategorization of radio as represented by both the boombox and the waves; these two aspects of radio importantly represent how the Black identity is communicated and sustained. In Jonathan Culler's discussion of Saussure's isolation of *langue* from *parole*, he reinforces the claim this paper makes of radio as a structural binary; Culler argues that "the former is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while the latter comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing".[68] By manifesting the institution of pro-Black nationalism and empowerment established by We Love Radio, Radio Raheem represents the capacity for hip-hop culture to galvanize democratic solidarity among marginalized people in efforts against institutional violence and white supremacy.

As a structure, the dualism of radio is further explored in the film in the context of its materiality, exemplified in the moments before the riot as radio meets its tragic demise. After Sal finally succumbs to his internalized hate, smashing Raheem's radio to pieces in an eruption of racial slurs, he drops his weapon and seethes, "I just killed your fucking radio".[69] Here, the structure of *langue* and *parole* is reapplied to radio as a separation between music and its vessel; by "killing" radio, Sal cannot smash the radio waves out of

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[67] Lightning, 69

[68] Jonathan Culler. "The Linguistic Foundation" *Literary Theory: An Anthology* 135.

[69] Spike Lee. *Do the Right Thing*

existence, only the speaker through which they are presently transmitted. His act of senseless violence resolves nothing, as the agent of protest that he attempts to crush is only a supplementary material form for a vast cultural institution far beyond his clammy grip. Furthermore, the second killing of Radio enacted by Officer Long—played by Danny Aiello's son Rick Aiello, a character who Lightning argues functions as Sal's double—represents the same materiality of hip-hop's existence twice over. Just as Sal's killing tries and fails to silence the wider culture of Black expressionism, Officer Long's murder of Radio Raheem works to the same effect.[70] In its structural duality and parallelism to black expression, radio occupies the narrative "both like a skeleton and like a genetic code".[71] That this structural relationship is a critical indicator of Lee's message of Black love and solidarity is proven by the resounding echo of music throughout the streets even after the speakers are shattered. In Bed-Stuy, as in the prevailing experience of systemic racism, the stronger force emanates not from the swing of an iron bar against a boombox or the knee of a cop against an innocent man's throat, but instead through the waves of love and collective identity the Black community has brought to life by virtue of this constant struggle.

Although Radio Raheem was iced by the hands of hate, he lands still on his right arm: indicated by his brass knuckles as the side of love. As his final moment passes and the body is hastily swept away, the spirit of hip-hop is survived in the diegetic space through Smiley. In the final shot of the riot sequence—notably the only time he smiles at all—he pins his artwork of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to Sal's half-incinerated wall, flames burning

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[70] Lightning, 69

[71] Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. "The Implied Order: Structuralism" *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* pp. 131.

brightly behind him as "Fight the Power" plays on, no speaker in sight. Through the symbolic dual killing of Radio, Lee demonstrates both man and music as functions of "the principle of stability and coherence" in Black expressionist culture and "the principle of action that allows the culture to exist in time as a living thing".[72] Even as the body of the bad-man hits the floor, his song remains the same; such is the binary expression of hip-hop culture and the critical dualism at which Lee's film takes aim. However, in examining the death of Radio Raheem as a metaphor, this paper recognizes that greater care and consideration is owed to the events on screen as very literal conditions of white supremacy that still afflict marginalized peoples in the contemporary moment.

As the credits roll, *Do the Right Thing* dedicates itself "from the heart of Bed-Stuy" to the families of Eleanor Bumpurs, Michael Griffith, Arthur Miller Jr., Edmund Perry, Yvonne Smallwood, and Michael Stewart—all murdered at the hands of police in the 1980s.[73] In a 2017 review of the film, Brian Johnson notes that "it would not be a leap to add the names of Michael Brown of Ferguson, MO or Freddie Gray, Baltimore, MD; Tamir Rice, Cleveland, OH; Sandra Bland, Houston, TX; Walter Scott, Charleston, SC; or Eric Garner, Staten Island, NY (all Black citizens killed by the police in 2014–15) to the names on that list".[74] To this list, this paper seeks to add the names of Breonna Taylor, Stephon Clark, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd as some of the most recent and notorious instances of police brutality against unarmed Black Americans since Johnsons' article was written. Today, Lee remains acutely involved in the 21st century fight against institutional violence through film and digital media, and recently released a short film on IGTV entitled *3*

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[72] Rivkin and Ryan, 131.

[73] Spike Lee: *Do the Right Thing.*

[74] Brian C. Johnson: "Baltimore 2015, Black Lives Matter and the Prescience of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*" *Film International,* pp. 32.

Brothers—Radio Raheem, Eric Garner and George Floyd. Stitching together footage of the three police murders, all notably by suffocation, Lee's direct correlation between the three men puts a fine point on Radio Raheem's relevance in the present age of hate. The story of Radio Raheem is both a demonstration and a commentary on hip-hop culture as it fights the power of white supremacy, reiterating a discourse on race that resonates even more urgently in the current era.

Justice for the victims of institutional hate crimes is beyond overdue; for most, it has been eschewed and swept under the age-old rug of white supremacy, maintaining the power that the music and spirit of Black culture fight to overcome. Since the death of George Floyd in May 2020 at the hands of Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin––recently convicted and sentenced 22 years in prison for second- and third-degree murder—there has been a heightened sensitivity of the global community to the systemic root of these crimes. As public attention and pop culture continues to move in the direction of anti-racism, iterations of hip-hop culture such as Radio Raheem remind us to listen carefully and fight the power of hate as it continues to ravage and take innocent lives. Indeed, the triumphs and tragedies of Bed-Stuy serves as an avenue to address hate in America, bringing awareness to the sociopolitical landscape of Black lives to encourage greater political solidarity to marginalized communities. We cannot change what happened to Radio Raheem, nor the numberless other innocent people senselessly iced by the left hand of hate, but what we can do is ardently commit ourselves to the dignity and freedom of the Black community, fighting for justice, equity, and the destruction of evil through the promise that from here on, we love radio.

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